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"Sketches of Resistance and Liberation" Juan Carlos Alom's *Periodo Especial, Havana Solo,* and the Imaginary of the Special Period

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"Sketches of Resistance and Liberation" Juan Carlos Alom's *Periodo Especial, Havana Solo,* and the Imaginary of the Special Period

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2021

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. George Flaherty, my advisor, for his feedback and engagement with my thesis. His guidance and rigorous feedback have been essential in the development of my writing and skills as a researcher.

I would also like to thank Dr. Adele Nelson, my second reader, who has been a source of continual wisdom.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the other members of my committee: Dr. Ann Reynolds, Dr. Eddie Chambers and Dr. John Clarke. Our conversations during the colloquium were encouraging and essential in the development of my project.

I want to name the emotional and intellectual support of my peers in the program specifically: Nicole Smythe-Johnson, Jennifer Sales, Lucy Quezada and Martha Scott Burton. As well as my peers, not in the Art History program including: Amal Amer, Jacques Guyot, Joe Joseph, Emma McAvoy and David Wildes for their encouragement this year.

Abstract

Thesis

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

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This thesis focuses on Alom's photo series *Periodo Especial* (1989-1990) and short film *Habana Solo* (2000). *Periodo Especial* showcases Alom's friends and community in various photographs taken during the Special Period. The images range from spontaneous snapshots to images taken before constructed sets overlapping in their shared interest in depicting the body. *Habana Solo* is a short experimental film foregrounding a number of improvised musical solos by various mostly Afro-Cuban street performers. The musicians who do the composing in *Habana Solo* are symbolically tasked with defining the flow through which the city unravels. Alom then echoes these spontaneous compositions in the film's visuals and editing.

These works are both informed by the context of the Special Period in Time of Peace, a period of austerity following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tracing how Alom's practice draws on visual experimentation and improvisation I outline how Alom makes a series of important interventions in the depictions of crisis in Cuba. Alom, I argue, creates work that strategically navigates and speaks to the legacies of foreign tourist photography in the 1990s and early 2000s, depictions the ideal Cuban citizen, and persistent racial inequalities following the revolution.

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Chapter 1: Juan Carlos Alom's Revolutionary City and the Special Period

For Cuban photographer and filmmaker Juan Carlos Alom, 1989 marked a year of transition as he was just beginning his career. Alom notes:

> I had hardly begun working as a photojournalist when the scarcity brought about by the Soviet Union's collapse obliged me to experiment, shaping my artistic vision into one that is driven by precariousness, spontaneity …[1]

The austerity measures imposed by the Cuban government during the "Periodo Especial en Tiempos de Paz" (Special Period in Times of Peace) marked a new era of material scarcity. While previously a significant part of the Cuban economy had been supported by Soviet subsidies, with the collapse of the Soviet Union the Cuban government turned to opening austerity measures alongside the opening of a new touristic sector in order to compensate for the economic loss.

This thesis focuses on Alom's photo series *Periodo Especial* (1989-1990) and short film *Habana Solo* (2000). *Periodo Especial* showcases Alom's friends and community in various photographs taken during the Special Period. The images range from spontaneous snapshots to images taken before constructed sets. They showcase Alom's subjects in implicit and explicit sexual scenarios converging in their shared interest in depicting the human body. *Habana Solo* is a short experimental film foregrounding a number of improvised musical solos by various mostly Afro-Cuban street performers. The musicians who do the composing in *Habana Solo* are

[1] Alom, Juan Carlos. "Juan Carlos Alom- About" http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html

symbolically tasked with defining the flow through which the city unravels. Alom then echoes these spontaneous compositions in the film's visuals and editing.

In both works, Alom foregrounds the importance of the city and urban experience albeit in very different ways. The city is Alom's direct subject in *Habana Solo* as he documents everyday instances in Havana's streets informed by the melodic improvisations of musicians. *Periodo Especial* depicts the urban landscape in a less straightforward way, but continually plays with the depictions of domestic space during some of the hardest years of the Special Period and, as a result, working within a visual legacy of photographs being created of Havana during the same time period. Alom also describes the work as depicting an "urban tribe"[2] further referencing the importance of the experience of the city in his creation. In doing so, Alom is able to create what Guiliana Bruno refers to as an "emotional itinerary"[3] of Havana as he remaps the city in a way that speaks to a historic moment of material and existential crisis.

Megan Daigle notes that the daily struggle to make ends meet in Cuba was referred to as "*la lucha*."[4] With everyday interventions like "reverting from cars to horse drawn-cards to waiting all days in queus for food rations to mending and remending clothing to find innovative new ways to get by without shampoo, antiperspirant, plumbing equipment…"[5] Words like *resolver* indicate quotidian navigations of crisis through informal avenues beyond those provided by the state. *La lucha* of the Special Period required street smarts or a knowledge of context and

[2] Ibid.
[3] Guliana Bruno. *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2018),15.
[4] Megan D. Daigle. *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 79.
[5] Ibid.

place rooted in lived experience. Street smarts was the knowledge an individual needed to read and selectively navigate a set of moving and continually changing and shifting circumstances. Alom's work doesn't narrate or translate the deeply personal experiences of the Special Period and *la lucha*. In part because there is something about their improvised nature that makes them impossible to convey to someone who did not experience those particular circumstances. In doing so, Alom's depictions of the Special Period distinguish themselves from the increased photographic and film production made by foreigners about Cuba in the years following the Special Period. *Habana Solo* and *Periodo Especial* although works that are rooted in documentary mediums are formally experimental and show an interest in disrupting the creation of a linear narrative or a narrative altogether.

Alom's interest in improvisation as a central experience of *la lucha*, I argue, is due in part to the difficulty of conveying the experience coherently without the adequate context. In working with such a fleeting concept in a moment of upheaval and scarcity, Alom locates his work in experiences in the city. Tackling the also challenging work of writing about an artist whose work is self-defined by "precariousness and spontaneity," I use the city as a way to contextualize Alom's work within the Special Period and also to locate it within histories of visual representation that I believe are important to appreciate the interventions made by *Periodo Especial* and *Habana Solo*. These interventions include allusions to foreign representations of life on the island during the 1990s and 2000s, the everyday challenges of navigating the Special Period, the visual legacies of the ideal Cuban citizen, Cuba's increased globalization, and persistent racial inequalities following the revolution.

La Habana

Understanding why Havana plays such a central role in Alom's work requires having a sense of the history of the city and the changes that occurred in the city during the special period. Karla Suárez's essay "La Habana" (2017) narrates these changes through her own childhood memories, creating a link between individual experience and urban space in a manner that parallels Alom's emotional itinerary of the city in her foregrounding of dance, music, and individual enjoyment. Suárez writes in her essay:

> Havana was normality, the break between adventure and adventure, the center of the world, of our limited islander world. It was taking advantage of the vacation we had left to get together and remember the journey and tell the others, "I was there, I did this, and the danger, and I'm not going back there, or I have to go back." It was neatly copying my diaries written in notebooks that were battered from the trip so I could read them to everyone, someday, so that we don't forget who built the bonfire so we could cook, who always arrived first, who complained, who loaded their pack with things that were useless at first but helped us to keep walking, who chronicled the journey, who we were; writing most of all for that, so we don't forget who we were and where we had been. Havana was daily life, the point of departure for the next trip, the umbilical cord.[6]

The essay continues like this as the author details sites that are at once the cities' most iconic and the most quotidian of situations. Suarez's essay is an autobiographical account which focuses on her specific history in line with the history of Cuba during it's years of transition. In every paragraph Suarez begins proclaiming "La Habana es…" (Havana is…) and then lists a scene of personal importance. Havana becomes "school, the uniform, Marti's poems repeated and recited for one's whole life." Havana also becomes "fingers learning to play the guitar at the conservatory." The essay continues unfolding in a similar manner, in every paragraph Havana morphs and changes into a scene of new personal import. Havana becomes mapped through Suarez's story and is whatever Suarez decides it is.

[6] Alarcón, Daniel. "Translation – Toy Story." Translated by Patrick Moseley. Produced by Daniel Alarcón and Karla Suárez. *Radio Ambulante*. April 9, 2019. Podcast, 43:55. https://radioambulante.org/en/translation/toy-story

Suarez's approach to narrating her own personal story alongside the story of the city of Havana mirrors Alom in their shared interest in the everyday and urban experience. Suarez's essay not only tells the history of post- revolution Havana and the Special Period but does so with affective texture. Her story, like Alom's, is not and does not seek to be a complete history. Rather it is a conscious foregrounding of the importance of individual experience.

Following Fidel Castro's rise to power, Havana was envisioned as the "revolutionary city" and both the city and its citizens became a central part of Cuban revolutionary political discourse. Castro portrayed the pre-revolutionary Havana before the revolution as the "embodiment of vices and problems that formed an obstacle for the desired society..."[7] The city, argued Castro, was an "environment of inequality, vice (gambling and prostitution), frivolity, and the reign of political and social corruption."[8] The 1950s casinos, mansions, cabarets, and tourist attractions would be upended by Castro's urban reform plans that sought to "ruralize" the city as a solution to this perception of Havana.

Ruralized Havana "transform(ed) the boundaries between the public and private" as it transformed the mansions abandoned by those who went into exile into offices, schools, and lodgings for students from the countryside. Private clubs were opened to the public and became Worker's Social Circles. The Plan del Cordon de La Habana (Greenbelt Plan of Havana) makes the city a productive agricultural space as city dwellers also turn into producers and farmers[9]

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[7] Velia Cecilia Bobes, "Visits to a Non-Place: Havana and Its Representation(s)," trans. Elisabeth Enenbach in *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989,* ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield. (N.C: Duke University Press, 2011),17.

[8] Dunja Fehimović, *National Identity in 21st- Century Cuban Cinema Screening the Repeating Island.* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 125.

[9] Velia Cecilia Bobes, "Visits to a Non-Place: Havana and Its Representation(s)," trans. Elisabeth Enenbach in *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989,* ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield. (N.C: Duke University Press, 2011),19.

mixing the cosmopolitan subject with a rural one. This parallel between a rigid crafting of an ideal revolutionary identity and the city is particularly important to understanding the images of the urban citizenry Alom crafts in his work.

The reimagining of Havana would continue into the Special Period and its wake. The historic center's declaration as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1982 led to a new institutional recognition of the city's importance and, in turn, significant re-investment and attention through government programs. Neighborhoods were begining to be redeveloped under the supervision of The Office of the City Historian of Havana, led by Eusebio Leal Spengler. Profits made from tourist transactions in hotels and restaurants were then reinvested into the restoration of other buildings in those same neighborhoods. Following the Special period in the 1990s Havana was again an economic epicenter as mass migrations from the country came to the city in order to find employment in the city's expanding tourism sector.

This interest in the city as a touristic sector seemed to veer away from the government's previous interest in its "ruralization" as it paralleled the Batista regime's investment in the city as a site that attracted foreign investment. This tension between the legacies of crafting an image of a virtuous revolutionary citizen after the revolution and the foregrounding of tourism in Havana's urban development is one that I continually see at play in Alom's work.

Suarez's essay similarly marks this shift with a detailing of the year of 1989. In the accounts of her childhood Suarez describes notable ease claiming the sites of Havana through her personal narrative. Her account of 1989 notes a point of estrangement from her once familiar city:

> Havana is the unrest of 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and when, after that, "mother Soviet Union" cut the umbilical cord where practically everything came. It's discovering another city overnight that has to adjust. It's closing all the stores, the long hours without electricity, the water and sugar for breakfast and the bikes becoming the only mode of transport. It's like someone

> wakes you up in the morning, brusquely, with no tenderness. The chaos, the implosion of the country. [12]

Suarez in particular notes how the Habana changed as it became increasingly open to tourism. She notes "… the city where little by little we became people without land, not foreigners, because the city was theirs and little electricity and its hotels and its restaurants…"[13] Not only does Suarez feel increasingly alienated within her own city as a result of the Special Period, she also finds that the finite amount of resources available in Havana go to its visitors.

The Special Period was Cuba's deepest crisis to date. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc alongside tightening of the US embargo led to the country losing over half of its imports and exports. Trade with Eastern Europe, which accounted for 75 percent of its international market, completely ceased. Cuba's gross domestic product plummeted. Domestic manufacturing dropped by 83 percent.[14] By 1994 the economy was estimated to only be operating at 60 percent, as imports of essential consumer goods and necessities almost completely ceased.[16] This led to nationwide shortages of food and medicine followed by a state of exception that included widespread rationing. Salaries were reduced and social benefits and services were scaled back as prices for goods were raised. The Cuban state's ability to provide the sort of universal social welfare it previously promised vanished.

The government was no longer able to provide its people with suitable living conditions and this, in turn, led to serious deficiency in public sector services including as transportation, health care, and electricity. The drastic economic circumstances led to a series of ideological

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[12] Alarcón, Daniel. "Translation – Toy Story." Translated by Patrick Moseley. Produced by Daniel Alarcón and Karla Suárez. *Radio Ambulante*. April 9, 2019. Podcast, 43:55. https://radioambulante.org/en/translation/toy-story

[13] Ibid.

[14] Megan D. Dailge, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 79.

[16] Ibid.

compromises. The lack of access to basic products led to the flourishing of a black market and a number of other informal practices that were tolerated by the state.

Three years later. in 1994, a series of public protests erupted in Havana exposing widespread discontent. They are known as the Maleconazo, name that itself refers to a specific place in the city, the Malecón, a waterfront esplanade were many residents gather, including the disenfranchised and sex workers. Suarez describes the events:

> Havana… you are August of 1994. You're disorder, people shouting in the streets, breaking storefront windows, helicopters flying overhead. You're the boardwalk we sat on to talk, drink, and end the night so many times, where so many people sit and soak in the fresh sea. You're the boardwalk turned dock to say goodbye to those who were leaving in homemade rafts. You're the explosion and then the calm, the "I hope you make it," "I hope it goes well for you, and send back money." You're the bitter smile: "Pioneers for Communism, let us be like Che," yes, foreigners.[17]

Suarez's description shows how her emotional association with the Malecon changes as site that once constituted a place of community pleasure now being a site of violence. The Maleconazo protests were followed by the subsequent *balsero* crisis in which over 32,000 Cubans left Havana in improvised rafts for Florida. Guillermina de Ferrari notes that the Special Period in Cuba, what she refers to as a Post-Soviet context, was marked not just by material scarcity but also an existential crisis. This sense of existential tiredness is reflected by Suarez's statement "seremos como el Che, si, extranjeros." Reflecting a notable disillusionment and estrangement not just within the changing city of which she now feels an outsider but also with the revolutionary project itself.

However, while Suarez's essay echoes a sense of disillusionment and up-rootedness, Suarez's Havana is also continually re-animated through the her memory and sometimes even

[17] Alarcón, Daniel. "Translation – Toy Story." Translated by Patrick Moseley. Produced by Daniel Alarcón and Karla Suárez. *Radio Ambulante*. April 9, 2019. Podcast, 43:55. https://radioambulante.org/en/translation/toy-story

her own body. For Suarez Havana is personal and embodied her map of the city is entwined with emotion. Despite her hardships within the city she staunchly proclaims that "For us, it was the city that no one was going to take from us, even though we couldn't go in its hotels, even though we had to eat the same food every day and mend our clothes and get sick of everything."[18] As the crisis of the Special Period depended and the city became more available to tourists, Suarez and Alom alike would have to find new innovative ways to retain a sense of claim to the city and by extension their place in Cuban society using the tools at their disposal.

Making with and in the City

Anne Marie Stork refers to Cuban filmmakers in the 1990s as "street filmmakers." Street filmmakers had to navigate the changes in their own society and also "adapt to their nation's abrupt entrance into the current world system."[19] As Cuba became increasingly globalized, opening to tourism and having to depend more on an international economic system, artists and filmmakers needed to renegotiate a process of artistic creation that since the revolution in the 1960s was squarely focused on the creation of a national identity. Alom's continual allusion to urban life, similar to Stork's description of "street filmmakers," allows him "to locate (himself) vis-à-vis a nation undergoing rapid transition." The street allows filmmakers in the 1990s to think about their place in Cuban society more broadly[20] as it locates itself in a liminal space beyond the confines of the state.

In representing this moment of rapid transition Alom, conveys the Special Period in a way that focuses on feelings rather than explaining it as Suarez does. Alom's films and

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ann Marie Stock, *On Location in Cuba Street Filmmaking During Times of Transition.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 26.
[20] Ibid, 25.

photography notably play with the legacies of Cuban film and photography in the creation of a post-revolutionary subject. Nevertheless, while he alludes to these histories he is interested in working with the documentary medium in a way that conveys more ambiguity than the rigid identity perpetuated by the revolution. The city, therefore, acts as a base for Alom to locate himself and craft images that are rooted in the experience of idiosyncrasy and contingency of urban life.

As I note earlier I refer to Alom's interest in the city as a way to contextualize his experimental works. Nevertheless, I also do believe that Alom's reference to spontaneity and improvisation are also central elements of urban life. Echoing an interest in the idiosyncrasies of everyday movement in the city Michael de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) emphasizes that everyday gestures, specifically the act of walking, continually make and remake the image of the city. The acts of the pedestrian, he notes, "appropriate… the topographical system (of the city)"[21] through individual movement. The way in which an individual move through the city involves decisions and improvisations with every step. Walking "creates shadows and ambiguities… it inserts multitudinous references… (social models, cultural mores, personal factors…"[22] all of which must be negotiated through the step by step movement of walking through the urban landscape.

As the individual walks and navigates the "moving 'tree of gestures"[23] that comprise the everyday actions of urban life they subjectively re-appropriate the topographical system of the city remaking it through their own subjective and embodied experience. Similar to the way in which Suarez's description of Havana has the city becoming everything the ice creams at

[21] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 97.
[22] Ibid,101.
[23] Ibid, 102.

Coppelia to the boardwalk to her friends, De Certeau's theories about walking in the city echo the importance of sensory experiences, small gestures, and everyday experience in creating a new urban topography.

Navigating a "moving tree of gestures" can also be an accurate metaphor for navigating a moment of crisis. During the Special Period specifically when resources were scarce one had to know what connections to reach out to for necessary resources and how to find basic necessities. Survival itself required "navigating a moving tree of gestures" as did moving through a changing city as public transport was cut and certain areas once accessible to Cubans were now reserved for tourism. This was especially true for Afro-Cubans who were left out of some of the most prestigious jobs in the tourism sector and had to rely more so on the informal economy. The movement that de Certeau makes reference to as capable of re-appropriating the topography of the city was not just part of individual fancy but a necessity that reflected the precariousness of the moment. Having the references needed to survive and improvise was a way of at times literally as well as metaphorically locating oneself in a Special Period Havana.

Havana and the Foreign Urban Imaginary

The lived experience of the Special Period informs Alom's work in the 1990s and 2000s. His film and photos both point to the way in which navigating *la lucha* is at times absurd and requires a level of creativity that can be random, ludic, and even pleasurable. While I argue that these are essential elements of Alom's artistic creation, I want to be careful to point out that Alom's play with themes of inventiveness during the special period are different from the clichés but forward by foreign photographers during the Special Period of a "noble" poverty.

Jose Quiroga characterizes the type of aesthetics vision produced of the Special Period by foreign photographers as one of: "Dignified poverty, a poverty of resistance. Cuba entered the

world's perennial market for images in the 1990s as an impoverished country, yet one where poverty could always be rendered in aesthetic terms."[31] Whereas Alom's photography never references poverty or the conditions of the Special Period in a direct way, opting instead for narratively complex images, foreign photographers in the 1990s in Cuba were interested in creating a repertoire of images of the island rooted in simplistic tropes and exotifying clichés.

In *Aesthetics and the Revolutionary City Real and Imagined Havana*, James Clifford Kent underscores that during the 1990s the production of photobooks on Cuba, more specifically the city of Havana, increased at an unprecedented rate: "From miniature pocketbooks to enormous coffee table volumes, these visual texts (typically produced by foreigners for foreigners and marketed outside Cuba) have centered predominantly around the visual signifiers that came to be known as the "post-Special Period" imaginaries of the island."[33] These visual signifiers, Clifford notes, include vintage American cars, colonial architecture, crumbling buildings and Cubans surviving with the absence of capitalism.[34]

Quoting the work of Cuban- American writer Achy Obejas, Clifford Kent describes how foreign photographers would come to Havana to spend a week or two and return home with a series of the same images. "…The tired older black woman, the mulata with a cigar in her mouth, half naked children happily playing baseball in the street, the proud driver of an American car, curvaceous women at the seawall, a billboard with Guevara and other men they can't identify."[35] This circulation of tourist photography increased an appetite for Cuban images. Foreign photographers notably were interested in further perpetuating a mythology of Cuba as a place

[31] José Quiroga. *Cuban Palimpsests*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 149.
[33] Ibid.
[34] James Clifford Kent, *Aesthetics and the Revolutionary City Real and Imagined Havana.* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 83.
[35] Ibid, 84.

"frozen in time" (Cuba: The Past Within (2014). American photographers, previously banned from visiting the city were specifically interested in portraying Havana as a "forbidden city" (Weekend in Havana: An American Photographer in the Forbidden City (2006), Unseen Cuba (2014)) with the photographer being tasked with pealing back the layers of the realities of Cuban life unmediated by the discourse of the Cuban government.

Photographer David Bailey's description of his photobook titled "Havana" reflects many foreign photographer's attitudes towards depictions of the city. Bailey has noted that *Havana* (2006) is a "superficial look, not a soul-searching investigation, a quick impression of a place that is unique in its geographical position."[36] Focusing on images of buildings, portraits taken on the street and photographs of Cubans in traditional costumes. Bailey's account of Havana reinforces the limiting foreign imaginaries that Clifford Kent describes. David Alan Harvey's *Cuba an Island at the Crossroads* (1999) similarly focuses on these street portraits of Havana's citizens. Meticulously framed and shot with beautiful shadows but still framing only passing encounters. Often little interested in the workings of actual Cuban politics, work created before during the Special Period in Cuba itself provided a notable counter point.

New Cuban Art

The artistic production carried out in Cuba during the Special Period has been referred to by scholars as el Nuevo Arte Cubano or new Cuban art. Generally believed to have originated around 1981, the artistic creation that characterized new Cuban art was informed by the "increasingly oppressive sovietization of culture on the island, the consolidation of political power and control, and the anathematizing of culture and specifically its critical vocation by the

[36] Bailey, D. (2006). David Bailey: Havana. Retrieved April 24, 2021, from https://www.amazon.com/David-Bailey-Havana/dp/386521270

Cuban leadership."[37] Nuevo Arte Cubano was also inevitably informed by the *Quincenio Gris* (1971-1976) five years of the harshest years of silencing and repression of the artistic community.

Characterized by the works of artists like Lazaaro Saavedra, Los Carpinteros (1.1), Wilfredo Prieto (1.2), and Tania Burgera the artists of new Cuban art were best known for reacting to the "prescriptions and proscriptions of official culture."[38] Gerardo Mosquera, Cuban writer and art historian, has noted that el Nuevo Arte Cubano is characterized in part by playing a "double game"[39] with the prohibited as art turned its attention to social and political critique.[40] He notes that the "inclination to respond to power"[41] led artists to take on a number of critical tools and diverse routes creating works that drew attention to the absurdity of bureaucracy in Cuba's current context.

The clever interventions made by new Cuban art, however, have also been critiqued by Mosquera for never actually expressing any type of counter-revolutionary stance. More so, the social and political critiques leveraged by the works focused on the dissonance between the bold ideological models posited by the Cuban revolution and reality:

> *Ha cuestionado la burocracia, el culto a la personalidad, el aplanamiento de las expectativas individuales, la rigidez partidista, pero no los fundamentos del sistema político imperante. En tal sentido, como menciona Iván de la Nuez, curador, historiador y ensayista cubano en una entrevista, ha habido más "disonancia" que "disidencia"...*[42]

[37] Rachel Weiss. *To and from utopia in the new Cuban art*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 11.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Felix Suazo Felix Suazo. Arte Y POLÍTICA en Cuba en el NUEVO MILENIO. September 30, 2019. https://www.coleccioncisneros.org/es/editorial/cite-site-sights/arte-y-pol%C3%ADtica-en-cuba-en-el-nuevo-milenio
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

Alom, unlike many of his contemporaries practicing in other artistic mediums, does not mention the Cuban government directly in his works. Nevertheless, his works do speak to the impact of ideas of an ideal revolutionary subject represented in photography and film in complex ways as I intend to illustrate in my discussions of his work. While not referencing the government directly, Alom's works are still political in their reference the failure of the revolutionary project during the Special Period and their calling out of persistent racial inequality in Cuban society. Differentiating himself from the visual legacies of foreign photographers and new Cuban art, Alom shows the downfall of the utopian project that is felt and rooted in the body.

My second chapter precisely interrogates Alom's depiction of the body and domestic space in his photo series *Periodo Especial* as I argue for the series' contributions in line with the types of images being crated about Cuba during the same time period and also by Alom's Cuban contemporaries. I argue that Alom plays with the expectations of documentary photograph in order to undermine viewer's expectations of a body in a moment of crisis. My third chapter focuses on Alom's *Habana Solo* where I read Alom's film as a reclaiming of black urban space through music and rhythm.

I am interested in tracing histories of Cuba usually left out of discussion of artistic creation during the Special Period including the role of sex workers or *jinterxs* and the experience of Afro-Cubans during the Special Period. Unlike many of the works that comprised the Nuevo Arte Cubano, Alom's work was not just political but also personal and rooted in his lived experience. I strive not only to argue for Alom's relevancy as an artist during a crucial moment in Cuban history but also contribute to the scholarship on Cuban art by showing how Alom by using the everyday as his subject importantly intervened in both a national and

international Cuban visual imaginary. Alom's *Periodo Especial* and *Habana Solo* did this by uniquely formally experimenting with his representations of lived experience.

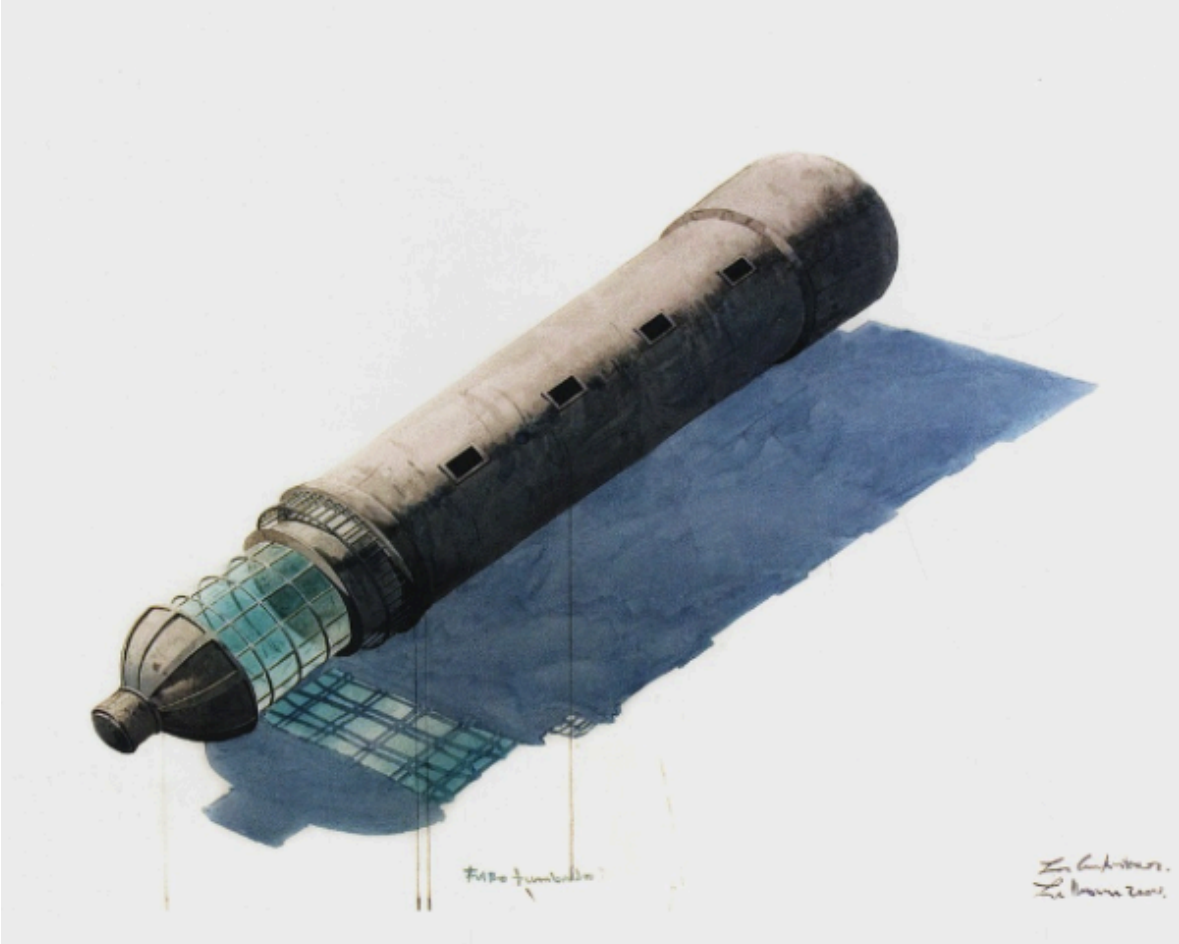

Figure 1.1
The Carpenters (Los Carpinteros), Fallen Lighthouse (Faro tumbado), 2004.
Watercolors, March 15, 2021, https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/asset/26837938.

Figure 1.2

Lázaro Saavedra, Detector de ideologías II,1994.
Colección: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Cuba*,* Accesed March 15, 2021, https://www.coleccioncisneros.org/es/editorial/cite-site-sights/arte-y-pol%C3%ADtica-en-cuba-en-el-nuevo-milenio

Chapter 2: *Periodo Especial* and the challenge to the image of "underdevelopment"

In describing his photo series, *Periodo Especial*, Alom notes with marked self-awareness that "This photographic series comprises a visual testimony that is very different from what others have documented of this special period in Cuba."[43] Referencing his work in relation to the increased photographic production created by foreigners who came to Cuba during the 1990s with the opening of its touristic industry.

Foreign photographers who came to Cuba during and after the Special Period, as James Clifford Kent has noted, were part of a "photo book complex" which created an imaginary of a hyper-sexual and exotified Cuba. Some of the titles for these works; *Cuba; Ay Cuba!: A Socio-Erotic Journey* (1999) and *Passage to Cuba: An Up-close Look at the World's Most Colorful Culture* (2015)[44] readily point to these stereotypes. This photographic production led to what Clifford Kent refers to as the development of a "Special Period aesthetic."[45] This aesthetic, constructed around pre- and post-revolutionary imaginaries of Havana revolved around a repeating set "visual fetishes… ruins in Havana, the Caribbean paradise, and the third-world Latin American country frozen in a "Cold-War aftermath."[46]

The photo book layout made it so photographs could either be contextualized alongside text or structured in a way that created a visual narrative. Alom's *Periodo* Especial, however, is a series. Distinct from a photobook or photo essay, the images in Alom's series repeat visual themes but the photographs can also stand alone. In creating a series Alom is less interested in

[43] Alom, Juan Carlos. Juan Carlos Alom. http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html.
[44] James Clifford Kent. *Aesthetics and the Revolutionary City Real and Imagined Havana.*(Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 89.
[45] Ibid, 84.
[46] Ibid, 87.

creating a narrative than creating visually experimental fragments. Some of the photos included in Alom's series include a woman sitting over rubble next to a stack of bricks. (fig.2.1) A naked woman looks intensely at the camera as she poses over a cloth background that still reveal the space where the image is being taken. (fig.2.2) A woman washes her hair as she reclines over a wash basin. (fig.2.3) Two men look at each other as candles burn over an inoperative television set. (fig.2.4)

I argue that Alom's depictions of everyday scenes in *Periodo Especial* offers an important intervention in the tradition of Cuban photography, specifically the Cuban photography of the 1990s and early 2000s, through his often under discussed interest in space and material alongside his interest in the body. Through his depictions of domestic space Alom references the conditions of the Special Period without aestheticizing poverty. Alom's images also play with the photographic legacies of the ideal Cuban citizen that comprise most photography following the revolution. Taking inspiration from his contemporaries, Alom plays with the expectations of photographic realism in order to creative images that are layered, narratively complex. Alom, however, is importantly distinct from other photographers making work in the 1900s and 2000s in his creation of work that directly speaks to the lived experience of the Special Period.

Photographic production in Cuba at the end of the millennium

While Alom claims that his photo series "comprises a visual testimony that is very different from what others have documented of this special period in Cuba" his converging interests with his contemporaries is irrefutable. Like many of his contemporaries including Marta María Perez Bravo and René Peña, Alom conveys a distinct interest in the body. Nevertheless, these converging interests with his contemporaries has often lead to Alom being

overlooked in discussions of photographic production in Cuban at the end of the millennium. Carlos Veloso Tejo makes a note in his *El Cuerpo Habitado: fotografia cubana para un fin de milenio* that a discussion of Alom's work because it would prove "excessively redundant."[47] Even though, Tejo Veloso also admits that Alom was one of the firsts clear examples, alongside Marta Maria Perez Bravo, of a new artistic use for photography in Cuba.[48]

The crisis of the 1990s, Veloso Tejo argues, represented a new subjectivity[49] in the creation of the photographic image. Photography stopped uniquely focusing on the political interests of the Cuban Revolution as had been the norm in previous decades. Beginning in the late 1980s and gaining increased traction in the 1990s, photography in Cuba began to be treated less as a mode of social documentation. Instead, photography began to be used as a mode of individual expression by artists.

Prior to the Special Period, the 1980s marked what was referred to as a point of inflection as New Cuban Art gained recognition on an international scale. Nevertheless, while this new international recognition came with increased opportunity of artists internationally and greater government leniency, many of the artists who were reference points within this period were reacting to the context of the *quincenio gris*, a period of marked artistic repression. The *quincenio gris* begain with the Padilla affair in 1971, an international scandal in which the well-known poet had to publically confess of holding attitudes deemed "counter-revolutionary" or expressing attitudes contrary to the Castro regime.

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[47] Carlos Veloso Tejo, *El cuerpo habitado fotografia cubana para un fin de milenio*. (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2009), 17.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid, 64.

The *quincenio gris*, marked five years (although it is also referred to as the *década negra* and the *triquenio amargo*) of artistic censorship ten years later known as the "*periodo gris*" (grey period). Artists and other cultural navigated the threat of incarceration and the state claiming all their assets. This led to one of the largest mass exoduses of intellectuals and artists from the island and marked the proceeding generation of artists and intellectuals working in Cuba. Harassment of the LGBTQ community was particularly marked during this time period as Cuba developed a closer relationship to the Soviet Union and in turn adopted more of its restrictive policies.

Carlos Veloso Tejo uses the term "Nuevo Documentalismo Cubano"[50] to refer to the new documentary practices emerging in Cuba in the mid 1980s. Referencing the Nuevo Arte Cubano, Nuevo Documentalismo Cubano, Veloso Tejo describes, marked new attitudes towards photography as forms of visual narration. These new documentary practices, which became popularized during the Special Period, were rooted in the individual subjectivities of photographers. Nuevo Documentalismo Cubano was marked by the documentary photographer's ability to show their preferences versus those of the state.

The photographers that Veloso Tejo delves into including René Peña, Abigail Gonzalez, Eduardo Hernandez Santos, Cirenaca Moreira, and Marta Maria Perez Bravo, and I argue Juan Carlos Alom created photographic works in the 1990s and early 2000s that focused on different stylistic depictions of the body. This new emphasis in photographic production depicting the body notably veered away from the bend towards conceptualism occurring in the wider world of

[50] Ibid, 63.

Cuban artistic production. Photographers in the 1990s were notably using their own skin and bodies as the vehicle to express their concerns.[51]

Nevertheless, unlike many of his contemporaries who preferred, Alom continually plays with different sets and contexts for his images. Marta Maria Perez Bravos works "No matar, ni ver matar animales" (Neither Kill, Nor Watch Animals Being Killed, 1986) from her *Para Concebir* series (To Concieve) notably uses a white background. (fig.2.5) This stylistic choice continued for the rest of her photographic production during the 1990s and 2000s. René Peña's *Man Made Materials* (2000) echoes this interest in meticulously composed images as he focuses on extreme close up images, which almost look like landscapes, of his own body. (fig.2.6) This shift in interest towards meticulously composed images that focused on the body as Carlos Veloso Tejo notes, made it so photography seized to be "a legible code of immediate interpretation" and instead "an exercise that demanded reflection"[52] prompted by the artist. Alom showcases a parallel interest to his contemporary photographers in playing with photography's indexicality. However, Alom, perhaps because of his background in photo journalism, displays more of an interest in playing with space and background than many of his contemporaries.

One image where Alom conveys this visual interest centers a naked woman who rests her right hand as she looks squarely at the camera. Her left hand grasps a piece of cloth and a brick. A piece of cloth is wrapped around her neck almost as if it were a necklace. Another piece of cloth is wrapped around her right leg like a bandage. The cloth which she holds and which is draped around her body, the image leads us to imply, is part of the cloth that acts like a

[51] Ibid, 96.
[52] Ibid, 84.

background for the image. Hanging from the top of the frame, like a curtain, the cloth extends onto the floor where the woman is sitting. (fig.2.2)

Alom intentionally shows us where and how the cloth is hung, dips in the fabric indicate where the hooks are placed to suspend the material. Alom adds dimension to the image by taking a piece of the fabric and hooking it to a piece of furniture that is closer to the images' foreground. This makes it so the cloth corners off a part of the space but also adds dimension rather than just lying flat. Beside the corner of a portion of wooden furniture in the foreground, the photograph features a number of other everyday objects. One white platform shoe is at the rightmost corner of the image. The white paint in the walls of the space chip.

Despite the creation of these backdrops, Alom still chooses to frame the image in such a way that it reveals the space behind it showcasing chipping paint and exposed beams. Alom's gesture to play with the composition of the space makes the image more layered and speaks to an interest in crafting image distinct from those of Pena and Perez Bravo. However, while images like this point to Alom's distinct style, it is worth noting that photographers like Abigail Gonzalez echoed Alom's choice to depict domestic space in his photographic creations during the special period.

Ojos denudos and *Periodo Especial*

Abigail Gonzalez, a contemporary of Alom, parallels the depiction of the naked body with domestic space. Both photographers feature domestic space in their images. In doing so they play with the conventions of social documentary photography in different ways. Alom and Gonzalez parallel each other in that they create images that while appearing they could be taken from everyday interactions are in fact often methodically constructed. They are less aesthetically

interested in a decontextualized body and are more interested in showing them in ambiguous situations in everyday space.

Abigail Gonzalez's photo essay *Ojos desnudos* (1992-2002) was created in the same time span as Alom's *Periodo Especial.* Nevertheless, Alom's *Periodo Especial* is often under discussed in academic literature in comparison to Gonzalez's work. As a result, some of the readings of Gonzalez's work provides a springboard for a more complex reading of Alom's photography specifically when we consider their formal and conceptual affinities. Both *Ojos desnudos* and *Periodo Especial* were made during some of the hardest years of the 1990s, similarly depicts young naked bodies carrying out mundane tasks.

De Ferrari notes that González's work "quote(s)" the mechanisms of the documentary photography of the first years of the revolution."[54] With the image of the revolutionary hero losing traction in the 1990s the increasingly difficult quotidian "invaded the iconographic register of the moment."[55] Previously this "iconographic register" was reserved for heroes of the Cuban revolution and representation of an ideal revolutionary subject. This is best exemplified by the photographs of Raúl Corrales, Osvaldo Salas, and Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez who heroically depicted Fidel and Che. In the 1970s photographers like Maria Eugenia Haya, known as Marucha, turned towards a new social documentary practice as their images centered ordinary people including farmers, workers, and dancers. This marked a shift away from the depiction of a heroic few. However, Marucha's depictions of everyday Cuban citizens was still profoundly tied into the revolutionary project as images of these self-sacrificing everyday Cubans came to

[54] Guillermina de Ferrari. *Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015), 140.
[55] Carlos Veloso Tejo. *El cuerpo habitado fotografía cubana para un fin de milenio*. (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2009), 64.

represent the new ideal Cuban citizen and the responsibility everyday people held in abiding by the ethos of the revolution.

Images of a difficult quotidian in the 1990s, as a result, represented the failure of the Cuban government to provide its subjects with basic needs during the Special Period. This marked a radical departure in Cuban image making. While cultural production after the 1970s was continually informed by the threat of being labeled as counter-revolutionary, photographic production in the 1980s was interested in the novel use of the image. This as, Veloso Tejo notes, led to a new sense of artistic freedom among photographers who were now able to use photography to respond to their own interior life. Interested of using photography to depict the "real," following in a legacy of using photography as social documentary, this new generation of photographers played with the expectations of the medium itself.

It is by "quoting" the mechanisms of documentary photography Gonzalez also plays with the viewer's expectations of the mediums depiction of photographic realism as depicting a "slice of life."[56] The photographs that comprise *Ojos desnudos* read like stills devoid of the context and scenarios in which they occur. In one of the images from Gonzalez's series, a woman sits on the toilet, her clothing at her ankles. We can look down at her naked body but her face remains out of view as she uses a small cup of water to wash herself. (fig.2.7) Another image where two women, in their underwear as they are cooking. (fig.2.8) Both foreground Gonzalez's interest in domestic space and everyday situations. The décor and the context Gonzalez has staged for these images are as integral as Gonzalez's focus on the naked body. The image's play with the legacy of photographic realism, in turn, invites the viewer to fill in the gaps of the larger drama from which these photographs have been taken which are, in themselves, non-existent.

[56] Desnöes, E. (1988). JUMP cut a review of contemporary media (J. Lesage, Trans.). https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC33folder/photoUndvtDesnoes.html

This play with narrative and leaving the viewer confused about the circumstances under which the photograph was taken is something that also is at play in *Periodo Especial.* Similarly, one of the photographs in Alom's series features two shirtless men staring at each other intensely, their faces in close proximity. (fig.2.4) Between them a television set appears to be on but showcases only a white screen. On top of the television set five lit candles are almost entirely melted down, wax spread over the top of the television set. The two men staring at each other intensely with the same body movement and gesture act as a sort of a mirror image for each other, the blank television screen facing the audience in a parallel manner acts as a sort of reflection. The framing of the image rejects technology in favor of the intense engagement of human interaction and contact. Electrical light and technology are rejected, or perhaps even prove futile, creating a need for the use of candlelight. Instead of having the subject look straight at the viewer, the two subjects of the photograph engage with each other, leaving the viewer to question about the basis of their interaction and the circumstances under which the photo was taken.

Alom also parallels Gonzalez in both his mutual interest in the body and domestic space. Alom often even formally echoes Gonzalez in his choice not to show the heads or faces of his subjects. (fig.2.9) One of the images in Alom's series showcases a half-naked woman whose body can only be seen from the waist down. The top half of her body is playfully covered by a long linen shirt which hangs from an exposed beam. She stands on the tops of her toes adding to a sense of her body being playfully elongated by the shirt. The image also showcases Alom's interest in domestic space. Exposed beam and the paint chipping of the walls echoes Gonzalez's affinity for showing decay in domestic space. Behind her furniture, a cabinet and a wooden table, signal the space as one that is lived in.

Nevertheless, Gonzalez exclusively shows his subjects' bodies from the neck down. Alom's subjects, by contract, more often gaze squarely back. While showing the subjects gazing directly at the camera is not a gesture Alom takes on in all of his images, many of the most striking photographs in *Periodo Especial* feature Alom's subjects looking directly at the camera. (fig.2.1) A young woman sits on a bed, a pile of bricks surrounding her, she pulls down her shirt and tilts her head looking directly at the camera. The woman who washes her hair in a basin looks back at Alom as he takes a picture. A half-naked woman with burlap wrapped around her waist holds up what appears to be the fragment of a bed post and, through the holes of the wooden structure, looks back at Alom. This, unlike Gonzalez's *Ojos desnudos* readily communicates the subject's awareness that they are being photographed. The subjects of Alom's *Periodo Especial* know they are having their pictures taken and pose accordingly.

The awareness of Alom's subjects as they gaze at the camera, likewise, also signals to the viewer that these images are posed. While Gonzalez's series is meticulously structured not seeing his subject's faces intentionally plays with the ambiguity of whether or not they are constructed. Alom's choice to have his subjects gaze at the camera does away with that possibility in its entirety. While Gonzalez implicates the viewer of being voyeuristic through the title and the framing of his work, Alom's subjects directly implicate the viewer by having his subjects looking back.

The title of Gonzalez's series which translates to "Naked Eyes" in itself points to the nakedness of the photograph's subject but also the viewer's complicitness in viewing the naked subject. Gonzalez's images feature young bodies lying naked on beds, taking off clothing, showing their naked bodies and insinuating sexual scenarios. This element of voyeurism in Gonzalez's images had Tim Wride describe *Ojos desnudos* as a work that "consciously generates

the illusion of surveillance, of personal space invaded."[57] Gonzalez's *Ojos desnudos* and relatedly Alom's *Periodo Especial* in their explicit and implicit depiction of sexual scenarios, however, may also reference a more contemporary invasion of personal space. Namely the rise of a tourism industry in Cuba during the Special Period and the role that sex tourism had in its development.

Jineteras

Alongside a new growing tourism industry, sex tourism in Cuba became more prominent in the 1990s as those who were left out of the tourist boom turned to jineterismo as a way of getting by. Jineterismo, as Megain Daigle describes in *From Cuba with Love: Sex Money in the Twenty First Century;*

> …is a "Cuban neologism derived from the Spanish word for 'jockeying'- in the sense of jockeying for advantage, for the most part- but the more literal and graphic interpretation was not lost. Some people opened unlicensed *casas particulares* or *paladares*, or expanded legal business beyond what their licenses allowed; some trafficked in cheap rum and knockoff cigars; some began making themselves sexually available to foreigners.[58]

The Jinetera, Daigle notes, came to represent the trails of the Special Period and anxieties around the return of capitalism in Cuba. The Jinetera posed a challenge to the ideals of the Cuban state and its connection to Cuban masculinity specifically the archetype of the ideal revolutionary subject the "New Cuban man" who was characterized by his masculinity and "sacrifice, political engagement, and dedication."[59]

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[57] Tim B. Wride. *Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography after the Revolution*. (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Merrell Publishers, 2001), 68.
[58] Megan D. Daigle. *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 81.
[59] Velia Cecilia Bobes, "Visits to a Non-Place: Havana and Its Representation(s)," trans. Elisabeth Enenbach in *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989,* ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield. (N.C: Duke University Press, 2011), 21.

As a result, the Jinetera became part of the imaginary of the Special Period, as she became an "image of thought."[60] Seizing to represent only herself and her personal experiences, the Jinetera became metaphor, a way of representing the anxieties of bodies during a time of crisis.[61] Alom's overt depiction of sexual scenarios speaks to the context of the emerging sexual tourism market in Cuba as some of his subject candidly pose naked (fig.2.10) and often engage with the camera. (fig.2.1 and fig.2.2)

However, viewing the Jinetera as a symbol only of a body living in precarious conditions can prove limiting. Sex, whether with foreigners or not, during the Special Period was also simply a way to find pleasure and enjoyment. Ivan de la Nuez notes; "Collectivization, sociability, indecency and promiscuity were, in Cuban socialism, ways to live the freedom of the flesh; to fill with desire the void left by the spirit of the law."[62] Echoing De la Nuez's comments, Daigle notes how "young people (came to) see sexual relationships as casual, fleeting, and even a leisure activity, in a world where everything has come to feel transitory."[63] Forgoing a view of masculinity and revolutionary subjecthood that prioritized sacrifice and dedication, the jinetera symbolized anxiety about the failure of the revolution. However, Alom's description of his photo series as "sketches of resistance and liberation"[64] also points to how the image of the jinetera was an important intervention in the visual legacies of depicting the dedicated ideal Cuban citizen turning instead towards a prioritization of personal pleasure.

Crisis as Lived Experience

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[60] Megan D. Daigle. *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 89.
[61] Ibid.
[62] De la Nuez, 2001 as quoted in Ferrari, Guillermina De. *Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015), 60.
[63] Sierra Madero as cited in Daigle, Megan D. From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 82.
[64] Alom, Juan Carlos. Juan Carlos Alom. http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html.

Describing *Periodo Especial,* Alom notes:

> Youth, my own youth, sketches out resistance and liberation. A tireless bohemia that survived the social experiment, using whatever strategies we had at our disposal…Photography united us as a group and as individuals; an urban tribe that survived the irreparable effects that the Special Period left on all the generations to come.[65]

My interest in this statement is Alom's ready foregrounding of an "urban tribe" and, thus, urban identity as being a cornerstone for his *Periodo Especial* photo essay. Likewise, I find this statement rich in its emphasis on the interplay between the "social experiment" of the Special Period austerity measures and Alom's own claim that he and the friends that are the subjects of these photographs used "whatever strategies we had at our disposal." In order to tease out the implications of Alom's emphasis on "using whatever strategies we had at our disposal" I draw from the work of Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis" which reads crisis as an everyday lived experience rather than an event.

In their description of everyday subjectivity during a time of crisis, Roitman and Mbembe attempt to veer away from the tensions of "resistance, emancipation, and autonomy"[66] distancing themselves from these questions in order to better apprehend "the series of operations in and through which people weave their existence in incoherence, uncertainty, instability and discontinuity."[67] Crisis, as they note, is above all a way of doing or lived experience marked in turn by the configurations, adjustments, and specific improvisations that mark everyday life. What in Cuba was commonly referred to as *la lucha*.

Alom continually makes reference to these configurations and adjustments in his depictions of domestic space as previously discussed. He also alludes to them materially. One of

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Mbembe, A, and J Roitman. "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis." *Public culture* 7.2 (1995), 323.
[67] Idid.

his images feature pants torn at the knees and at the crotch. (fig.2.11) An inoperative television set appears as a recurrent motif. (fig.2.4) Another of his images showcases a woman over a pile of rubble and stack of bricks. (fig.2.1) Another image features a woman looking at the camera as she washes her hair on a large metal basin. Draped over the background and above the floor where the woman washes her hair is a clear piece of plastic. She holds her head up using her right hand, her left hand is on her waist beneath the cloth that is covering her body. She looks at the camera directly. (fig.2.3) Holding down the plastic in the left of the frame is a brick with a piece of wire that connects it to the basin and hanging from the wire are pieces of torn cloth, showing a repeating set of materials in Alom's photo series. Together these images are not meant to comprise a cohesive narrative of *la lucha* but rather speak to certain events or fragments of the lived experience of the Special Period.

Providing an interpretation for Abigail Gonzalez's *Ojos Desnudos,* Guillermina de Ferrari reads the domestic scenes in Gonzalez's photographs as featuring "dirt, chaos, and the precariousness of the infrastructure."[68] De Ferrari in her reading of the works, notes that Gonzalez's depiction of an inoperative bathroom, for example, "reminds the spectator about one of the conditions that became evident during the Special Period: the failure of domestic technology to simplify and even hide certain daily operations."[69] A similar reading could easily be applied to Alom's depiction of domestic space and broken materials in *Periodo Especial.*

However, I argue that this reading is too simplistic of an account for what Alom does in his work. De Ferrari's emphasis on the precariousness of infrastructure in *Ojos desnudos* reads as

[68] Ferrari, Guillermina De. *Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba*. New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015, 143.
[69] Kent, James Clifford. *Aesthetics and the Revolutionary City Real and Imagined Havana.* Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019, 84.

not so distant from the "visual fetishes" perpetuated by foreign photographers in the 1990s interested in Cuba's ruins and third world status "frozen in a "Cold- War aftermath." Alom's images by contrast I argue show a distinct awareness of this hunger for "photographic images of underdevelopment."[70] While at times teasing these tropes in his showcasing of elements like spaces where paint is chipping and rooms full of rubble, Alom ultimately distances himself from these accounts through his use of a variety of staging methods ranging from images that appear meticulously constructed (fig.2.12) to images that appear as though they could be documentary slices from everyday situations. (fig.2.13) In doing so, Alom's images often confound the viewer with their visual experimentation.

Edmundo Desnöes in his essay "The photographic image of underdevelopment" challenges photographic realism and its visual legacy noting it's deceptiveness. He notes:

> It is really fascinating to try to clear up this clutter, to try to analyze all the ways that photography has become tied up with our everyday experience. It's a delicate operation…For us in Cuba, for example, the photographic image of underdevelopment constantly meshes with our own experience and has become a decisive ingredient in how we view the Third World. We live in that world yet hardly realize how we have been conditioned by the photographic viewpoint of the other world.[71]

Published in 1967, Desnöes' essay speaks to his frustrations with photographic depictions of the Third World as he discusses how images then create an imaginary that affects everyday life. Parallel to Clifford Kent's concerns about the Special Period photobook complex, Desnöes argues for a way of viewing Cuba that is not defined by limiting and clichéd depictions of poverty and calling for new photographic creation.

[70] Desnöes, E. (1988). JUMP cut a review of contemporary media (J. Lesage, Trans.). https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC33folder/photoUndvtDesnoes.html
[71] Ibid.

Although Desnöes' essay was published well before Alom created his photo essay, I argue that Desnöes hesitations about depictions of the "underdeveloped" world is reflected in Alom's practice. This is perhaps most evident in Alom's choice to create formally experimental images rather than working in the tradition of photographic realism more directly. In doing so, Alom interrupts the ability to create a narrative around depictions of bodies during a historic moment of crisis. His inclination to experiment with his photographic production not only speaks to the intricate of lived experience but also, as he has alluded to, experimentation as a fundamental part of survival during a moment of crisis. Making his photographs stand-alone experimental fragments, in turn, prevents them from being used to perpetuate visual legacies of poverty and underdevelopment.

In making a case for how Alom's images play with a careful balance between alluding to the conditions of the Special Period while also showing an interest in creating visually experimental photographs, I also want to be careful to not affirm other tropes about crisis. While Mbembe and Roitman veer away from discussions of crisis as a system, framing it as an everyday physical experience they also are cautious to not refer to crisis as inexplicable. They note that in underscoring crisis as incomprehensible the actions that individuals take during a time of crisis are also depicted as inexplicable instead of being viewed as "reasonable and legitimate action."[72]

Individuals in moments of crisis, it is often true, longer understand what is happening to them, much less that they have mastered the ins-and-outs of the processes in which they are implicated. However, the actions they take can no longer be diminished as being simple tinkerings with the system in order to survive. Instead, they have become "ways of doing"

[72] Mbembe, A, and J Roitman. "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis." *Public Culture* 7.2 (1995), 325.

belong to a register of new public knowledge. Mbembe and Roitman describe crisis not as a "system" but rather a "*register of improvisations* lived as such by people."[73] One of the reason I believe *Periodo Especial* is so effective at speaking to the Special Period is precisely because it is so anchored in the specificity of Alom's lived experience. It is also the specificity of this personal experience that, I believe, Alom does not wish to translate making his "registers of improvisation" read only to those with the context of having also lived through it.

Conclusion

Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield begin *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989* by noting: "The post-Soviet present continues to be a time of dramatic change and intense uncertainty. For writers and artists who have produced a myriad of films, short stories, books, and artwork about the city, it is Havana that best symbolizes this uncertainty."[74] This emphasis on Havana, Bikenmaier and Whitfield note, is due in part to an emphasis on its ruins, particularly a foreign interest in the ruins of the city and a desire to read the derelict buildings that punctuate the urban landscape of the city "allegorically" as "architectural decay (that) signaled the inevitable decline of Cuba's socialist project."[75] This interest specifically in the decay of the city was, as many Cuban born scholars and artists have noted, a particular fascination of foreigners.

While ruins of buildings are the main point of focus in depictions of the city, it was also not uncommon as Birkenmaier and Whitfield note for filmmakers and other artists to "move literally inside the ruins to show some of the very concrete problems that the inhabitants of

[73] Ibid, 326.
[74] Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield, "Beyond the Ruins," in *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989,* ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield. (N.C: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.
[75] Ibid.

Havana are facing…"[76] Like his foreign contemporaries, Alom signals an interest in the city and decay as themselves within his work among many others.

However, departing from a reading of ruins "allegorically" Alom posits an interplay between bodies and their environments and social conditions creating images with multiple literal layers as well as metaphorical layers rather than creating an allegorical image. Alom's photographs do not have a narrative flow nor are they given any context. This, as I have previously discussed, not only plays with the viewers expectations but also creates a sense of confusion as the viewer wonders the context in which the scenarios that Alom depicts are situated. Alom's photographs are at once quotidian and cryptic in balancing this delicate tension, Alom's images strategically play with the visual legacies of the Special Period and the visual legacies of depicting a moment of crisis more broadly.

[76] Ibid.

Figure 2.1
Juan Carlos Alom, From the Series *Periodo Especial,* 1990,
Silver on gelatin, Accessed April 1, 2021 http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html.

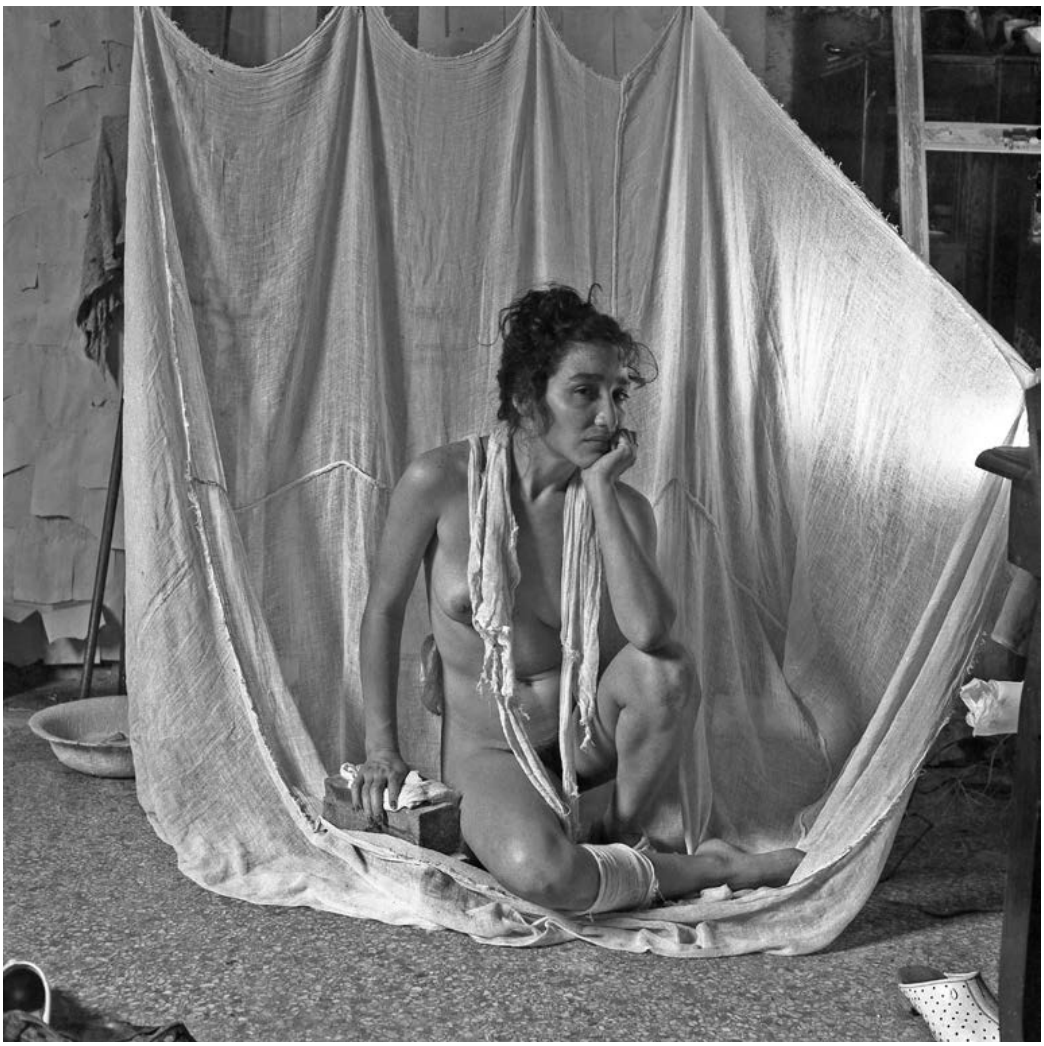

Figure 2.2

Juan Carlos Alom*, Baby me mira (Baby Looks At Me). From the Series "Periodo Especial"*, 1990*,*
Silver on gelatin,15 7/10 × 14 2/5 in,40 × 36.5 cm, Accessed April 1, 2021,

http://www.artapartamento.com/en/artists/juan-carlos-alom/work?page=2.

Figure 2.3
Juan Carlos Alom,From the Series *Periodo Especial,* 1990,
Silver on gelatin, Accessed April 1, 2021 http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html.

Figure 2.4
Juan Carlos Alom,From the Series *Periodo Especial,* 1990,
Silver on gelatin, Accessed April 1, 2021 http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html.

Figure 2.5

Marta Maria Perez Bravo, *No matar, ni ver matar animales (Neither Kill, Nor Watch Animals Being Killed)*, From Para Concebir (To Conceive), 1985-86,
Accesed May 3, 2021 https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/cuban-photography-082801-102702/attachment/75/

Figure 2.6

René Peña,Man made materials Series, 2000,
Photography on paper,31 1/2 × 44 1/10 in, 80 × 112 cm, Accessed April 10, 2021,
https://www.artsy.net/artwork/rene-pena-man-made-materials-series.

Figure 2.7

Abigail Gonzalez, Sin titulo (Untitled), From Ojos Desnudos (Naked Eyes), 1995, Accessed May 3, 2021 https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/cuban-photography-082801-102702/attachment/62/.

Figure 2.8

Abigail Gonzalez, Sin titulo (Untitled) From Ojos Desnudos (Naked Eyes), 1995, Accessed May 3, 2021 http://www.sonespace.com/sonespace-eng/exhibitions/2011/cuban-shots/abigail-od-ht/abigail-work-eng.html.

Figure 2.9
Juan Carlos Alom, From the Series *Periodo Especial,* 1989,
Silver on gelatin, Accessed April 1, 2021 http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html.

Figure 2.10
Juan Carlos Alom, *Evel y Sonia (Evel and Sonia), from the series Periodo Especial (Special Period))*, 1989,
Silver on gelatin, 33 x 28 cm, Ed. 3/3 + 2 A/P, Accesed May 3,
http://www.artapartamento.com/en/artists/juan-carlos-alom/work?page=2.

Figure 2.11
Juan Carlos Alom, At Nuevo Vedado´s House, from the series Special Period,1989, Silver on gelatin, 35,5 x 33 cm, A/P I (Edition of 3 + 3 A/P), Accesed May 3, 2021, http://www.artapartamento.com/en/artists/juan-carlos-alom/work?page=2.

Figure 2.12
Juan Carlos Alom, From the Series *Periodo Especial,* 1990,
Silver on gelatin,Accessed April 1, 2021 http://juancarlosalom.com/photography.html.

Figure 2.13
Juan Carlos Alom, *PM, from the series Periodo Especial (Special Period),* 1989, Silver on gelatin, 33 x 28 cm, Ed. 2/3 + 2 A/P, Accesed May 3, **2021,** http://www.artapartamento.com/en/artists/juan-carlos-alom/work?page=2

Chapter 3: *Habana Solo* and the Reclaiming of Black Urban Space

The introductory sequence to *Habana Solo* (2000) situates the viewer with a landscape shot of the city's high-rise buildings and downtown area. (fig.3.1) The camera lingers on this panoramic shot for a brief moment before it cuts to a close up shot of a man wearing large sunglasses who takes off his watch as he sits down in front of a piano. (fig.3.2) He begins playing a mellow that accompanies a series of static frames that linger on the crumbling buildings that famously punctuate Havana's urban landscape. (fig.3.3) Framed at a medium distance, the fragments show the ruins that have become synonymous with Old Havana.

Transitioning from one still frame to another footage so motionless it appears to be photographs. In doing so, *Habana* Solo's opening sets up a false expectation for a film that is characterized by its dynamism, movement, and visual experimentation. Following its introduction, the expectation of a slow static progression of images of the city's architecture is immediately subverted. The next montage begins as it shakes rapidly as it features the cobble stones of Havana's streets. (fig.3.4) The motion, which echoes that of running, it paired with a rapid conga solo. Unlike the piano player who we see siting down and in the process of preparing to play his instrument, the only shot we see of the conga player is a close-up of his face which, paradoxically, stays focused and serene. Not to showcasing the performers hands or the instrument itself, the only indication we have of his playing is the slight movement of his body which hints that he is playing the drums beyond the frame. (fig.3.5)

Moving from the streets of Havana to the interior of one of its buildings, our next point of focus in the film is a cast iron elevator. (fig.3.6) The film then takes us inside the elevator where a man is playing a guiro. A close up of the guiro foregrounds how the action needed to play the guiro, scratching its ridged surface with a metal comb, mirrors the up and down movement of the cast iron elevator. (fig.3.7) Throughout the remainder of *Habana Solo* we experience the city of Havana in this manner through the tempo set up by the various musicians featured in the film. Their instruments inform the films' physical motion and, thus, our experience of what comes into view.

In the short essay "There Is No Silence in Havana" Quiroga, continuing his analysis of Cuban music in the popular imaginary, describes the way a particular archetype of Cuban music has been commodified for the tourism industry: "Sextets, trios playing romantic music. Drums and guitars, percussionists and *timbaleros*. Singers, bassists, electric pianos, maracas. Dance groups with kettledrums, voluntary workers dressed in the style of the nineteenth century. More than three days in Havana implies knowing the entire repertoire."[77] These segments which Quiroga calls "prefabricated but live" speaks to a tension between a foreign desire to consume a type of music that is recognizable as being emblematic of Cuba and the mutable and continually changing, improvised, rhythms that are essential to Cuban musical production.

Shot in hand processed 16mm black and white film, Alom's medium of choice, *Habana Solo* is an experimental "city-symphony."[78] As his starting premise, Alom asked various street

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[77] Jose Quiroga, "Bitter Daquiris: A Crystal Chronical," trans. Elisabeth Enenbach in *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989,* ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield. (N.C: Duke University Press, 2011),19.

[78] Ism, ism, ISM: HAVANA SOLO: The films of Juan Carlos Alom. https://www.lafilmforum.org/archive/winter-2018/ism-ism-ism-havana-solo-the-films-of-juan-carlos-alom/

musicians in the city of Havana to improvise a solo, playing whatever song they wanted at that given moment. Putting improvisation at the center of the film's production. Throughout its various sequences, *Habana Solo* puts forward a pattern through which all of the various ephemera and elements it showcases can be connected and in which it makes sense that they are showcased alongside each other.

Rhythm here provides a sort of order and structure to a set of desperate visual elements that would seemingly have nothing to do with each other in the urban environment. This order, however, is also incredibly ludic and playful. Rhythm at once continually sets up an order and continually interrupts the order that is already set up as Alom moves with the rhythms set up by each musician, adapting the visuals to echo the musical stylings of each musician. By having his film unfold according to a series of improvised rhythms, I argue that Alom produces a film in which rhythm importantly functions as a new mechanism for non-linear storytelling. In doing so, he speaks to a triple legacy of Cuban musical improvisation, improvisation in film, and improvisation in daily life during the Special Period. Alom's film importantly focuses on bodies, specifically black bodies, their movements, and their reactions and remaps the city according to these. In doing so, Alom speaks to Afro-Cuban presence in the city at a moment when Havana was becoming increasingly racially segregated.

Afro-Cubans, Music, Cuban Cinema, and the City

The Special Period in particular, as Mark Sayer in *Racial politics in post-revolutionary Cuba* argues, amplified already existing racial inequalities. Afro-Cubans were notably left out of the sectors of legal employment in Cuba, and the highly profitable jobs of the burgeoning

touristic sector. Sayer notes that; "The best jobs are reserved for those with 'revolutionary merit,' who most often happen to be white."[79]

Sayer also foregrounds that the Afro-Cuban community was particularly affected by the housing crisis brought about by the Special Period accounting for most of the population in overcrowded slums and lack of access to the familial and social connections needed to trade and get access to housing in Havana. As Sudjatha Fernandes notes "The hotels, streets, and beaches of the city were increasingly designed to cater to the pleasures and desires of white tourists, while working class black residents of the city were harassed for identification cards."[80] This made it so Havana in particular was a racially segregated city, the dual economy led in turn to a dual city in what has been called "tourist apartheid."[81]

Racist legacies had a marked impact on the everyday lives of Afro-Cubans during the Special Period specifically in the city of Havana. With unequal employment and access to resources in a blossoming tourism sector doing away with the illusion of an equal society promised by the Cuban revolution. However, as Sayer notes, ideas of revolutionary merit had always been entwined with whiteness.

Under Batista, Havana received the most intense US foreign influence, becoming a center for organized crime, gambling, prostitution, and corruption. Along with changing urban policy and development programs that sought to change the social underpinnings of pre-Revolution Havana, Castro was also intent on changing the archetype of the urban subject in the 1950s from

[79] Mark Q Sawyer. *Racial politics in post-revolutionary Cuba*. (New York: Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 117.
[80] Sujatha Fernandes, "Made in Havana City: Rap Music, Space, and Racial Politics" in *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989,* ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield. (N.C: Duke University Press, 2011), 178.
[81] Ibid.

"frivolous, ludic, and elegant"[82] (exemplified by Sergio in the incredibly influential *Memorias del Subdesarollo*) to a new proletarian Habanero who exemplified "sacrifice, political engagement, and dedication."[83] This archetype also referred to as the *hombre nuevo* "the new man" prioritized hyper masculine figure of "revolutionary merit."

One area where we can see debates about the ideal revolutionary subject manifest is within Cuban film following the revolution, specifically Orlando Jimenez Leal and Nestor Almendro's *PM* (1961). The debate surrounding *PM* is perhaps more well-known than the film itself. Following the film's initial screenings, a series of meetings were convened by the ICAIC were attended by artists, media directors, and government officials and presided over by Castro himself. Following these meetings Castro published his interventions in "Words to Intellectuals." This document turned infamous speech concluded by noting "within the revolution everything, outside the revolution nothing" establishing a cultural policy for the following decade.

PM focusses on various elements and scenes from Havana's nightlife. Couples sway and drunkenly stumble as they listen to live music in crowded dancefloors. Patrons of a crowded bar and not so crowded coffee shop chat and smoke cigarettes. The film reads as a collection of fragments from an otherwise normal evening in the city. *PM*, however, was made from found footage of a news story of the night of the Bay of Pigs invasion. The original footage included scenes of military training alongside scenes recorded in bars, nevertheless for his film Jiménez Leal removed these sequences of military training to focus on a depiction of Havana's urban

[82] Sujatha Fernandes, "Made in Havana City: Rap Music, Space, and Racial Politics" in *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989,* ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield. (N.C: Duke University Press, 2011), 178.
[83] Dunja Fehimović, *National Identity in 21st- Century Cuban Cinema Screening the Repeating Island.* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 125.

nightlife against the wishes of Cuban authorities who advised Leal that the imagery would prove inopportune for the political moment.

The resulting film, absent of sequences of military training, was seen as representing venues and figures that the revolutionary leaders believed were representative of the "worst of pre-revolutionary Havana: American tourism, organized crime and rampant vice"[84] by "explicitly or implicitly"[85] liking the anonymous working-class figures depicted in the video to "activities considered counter-revolutionary including prostitution and homosexuality."[86]

While these identities were being continually and organically expressed within the city, with "working- class clubs bringing together marginalized sexual communities,"[87] these were not identities that aligned with the archetype of the *hombre nuevo*. More so, Carrie Hamilton in her analysis of the *P.M. affair* has noted that there is a racialized element to the strong backlash against the film noting that the majority of PM's subjects are black.[88]

Habana Solo, therefore, marks a departure from the reception of Afro-Cubans in *PM* as unideal revolutionary subjects. Simultaneously, the film speaking to its current context in the aftermath of the Special Period and the unequal access Afro-Cubans had to the highly profitable sector of the tourism industry and housing within Havana more broadly. By foregrounding mostly footage of black pedestrians and having the city unfold through the improvised solos of black musicians, Alom is able to speak to the legacies of *PM* which is shot in a very similar way to *Habana Solo*. Stylistically both *PM* and *Habana Solo* are films shot in 16mm black and white

[84] Hamilton, Carrie. "Sex, Race and Censorship in Cuba: Historicizing the P.M. Affair." NOTCHES. November 4, 2014. Accessed August 12, 2018. http://notchesblog.com/2014/11/04/sex-race-and-censorship-in-cuba-historicising-the-p-m-affair/.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

footage and focus on musical montage. Alom not only speaks to the cinematic legacy of *PM* but also his contemporary context in the aftermath of the worst years of the Special Period. "Buena Vista Social Club After Image"[89]

One of the longest sequences in *Habana Solo* features extended shots of people walking on the street who pose for the camera as though they were being photographed. The people we see featured now are mostly motionless, they look at the camera often long enough that we can see them break their expression smiling, laughing, or playfully engaging back. (fig.3.8) While we are introduced to the musician both as a point of transition at the beginning and at the end of the montage, the music for most of the sequence remains a background element to the long sequences of calmly composed shots of Havana's mostly black pedestrians who pose for the camera. This is the only sequence in the film where the music acts as a secondary or background element to what is depicted on the screen, emphasizing the people that Alom depicts.

Alom's focus on black citizens in this sequence can be read as an important intervention in both Cuban cinema and increasing segregation of Havana during the Special Period. Nevertheless, the music that is played during this sequence and the smiling pedestrians that accompany the sequence teeters on a cliché. Alom's playful framing in the film's guitar sequence mirrors his interest in and work in photography. This sequence, in its relative stillness, echoes some of the shots at the introduction of the film which foreground Havana's ruins. Framed mostly at medium or long distance, Alom showcases his subjects mostly standing on the street. The fragments of footage can at times read almost like snapshots.

[89] James Clifford Kent. *Aesthetics and the Revolutionary City: Real and Imagined Havana*. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 149.

As James Clifford Kent notes in *Aesthetics and the Revolutionary City: Real and Imagined Havana* there was an increased production of photobooks during the 1990s about Cuba and Havana more specifically. These photobooks, created by foreign photographers who would come to spend two weeks on the island focused on a series of repeating tropes including "…The tired older black woman, the mulata with a cigar in her mouth, half naked children happily playing baseball in the street, the proud driver of an American car, curvaceous women at the seawall, a billboard with Guevara and other men they can't identify."[90] Photobooks like David Bailey's *Havana* focus on street portraits that feature similar framing to those in Alom's guitar sequence.

The guitar solo, an upbeat melody, echoing the sounds of the traditional Cuban *punto.* A musical style that originated in the countryside also resembles the type of music that became seen as emblematic of Cuba with the release of the hit documentary *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999). At the center of the film is a style of Cuban music known as the *son* which originated in the east of the island. Released one year before *Habana Solo, Buena Vista Social Club* defined imaginaries of the city of Havana for the last twenty years.[91] The success of the film creating a boom or "phenomenon."[92] The film not only became the not only most internationally recognizable face of Cuban music but also informed how Cuba's capital city was imagined.

As James Clifford Kent notes, the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon had a profound effect on the global imaginary of an island that had "previously been identified with beach paradises and hot dancing,' only for it then to be 'defined by images of crumbling Havana and

[90] Kent, James Clifford. *Aesthetics and the Revolutionary City: Real and Imagined Havana*. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 84.
[91] Ibid, 149.
[92] Ibid.

lively *viejitos* (old people)"[93] While these two depictions need not be mutually exclusive and very often are both portrayed in foreign imaginaries of the island. Clifford Kent, however, notes how the *Buena Vista Social Club* phenomenon foregrounded nostalgia.

Specifically, Clifford Kent notes how the album cover for *Buena Vista Social Club* had a part in creating this nostalgic fantasy:

> …It depicts vocalist Ibrahim Ferrer strolling along a Havana street, in which 1950s American cars are parked in the shadows. Sporting a white at cap and a yellow and white striped shirt, and smoking a cigarette.... The photograph has a washed-out, almost painterly, quality that—in short—has the effect of evoking in the viewer a nostalgia for an "Old World" Cuba. The *Buena Vista* album cover became an iconic image in its own right that underpinned the *feel* and visual style of the entire project. It was, to all intents and purposes, a foundational image for the way Havana would be represented by the foreigner in the years to come and emblematic of the way different Havana fantasies would be conjured through both film and photography.[94]

Creating a musical film in the aftermath of the *Buena Vista Social Club* and during the height of its "phenomenon," Alom's representation of certain musical styles or representations of the city could very easily fall into the clichés of a nostalgic and exotifying foreign imaginary. In particular his guitar solo would seem to play with these tropes set up by both the photobook complex and the *Buena Vista Social Club* phenomenon.

However, one distinguishing factor in this montage is how Alom showcases the passersby fidget and look at the camera questioningly. In the guitar sequence Alom films his encounter with the pedestrians as they try to decide what way they will position their body. One notable example features a woman in a white shirt who lifts her head up, her hands clasped behind her back as she seemingly waits for Alom to take her picture. She then places her hand on her hip and raises her arms playfully seemingly saying she is not sure how to best pose for the

[93] Ibid, 154.
[94] Ibid, 153.

camera. Similarly, some of Alom's other subjects in this sequence do not move at all looking at the camera with some suspicion as they continue to carry out their daily tasks. (fig.3.9)

Alom in this sequence lingers long enough on its subjects for them to make a surprising gesture, fidget, or play with the camera. (fig.3.10) In doing so, Alom signals to the viewer the construction of the sequence. Aware that they are being filmed, the focus of the montage is not so much documenting the residents of Havana in a style that mirrors photography but more so it focuses on capturing these slippages in their exchange with the camera. (fig.3.11)

Imperfect Cinema and Street Filmmakers

As previously noted, Alom's interest in improvisation is at the center of *Habana Solo*. Both because of its emphasis on musical improvisation and Alom's own responsive and improvised camera work. Improvisation is both a practice for Alom and the musicians and a subject in the film in itself.

One place where we can see this at play is in *Habana Solo's* cello montage. To accompany a cello solo, Alom points his camera to a number of ephemera in Havana's streets; a wispy fabric billows in the wind, (fig.3.12) shadows of children move as the play over pavement, (fig.3.13) decorative garlands hung between balconies sway softly, (fig.3.14) metal spikes set down in a construction site shake slightly. (fig.3.15) The film lingers showing a barbed wire fence where a picture of Fidel is secured next to a sign that reads "Parque Aguicstamos de Pie y Firmes." (3.16) The sign, which is nonsensical, is a parodic statement of the types of titles usually given to parks and other national sites. This is the only sequence in the film in which the music stops as it lingers on the image of Fidel. In the background, we only hear the sound of the 16mm footage whirls. Alom highlighting of this small parodic gesture is a brief but poignant

signaling to both a collective disillusionment in the revolutionary project and also the interventions of everyday people in their city.

It is also, however, important to underscore that improvisation was also a central element of Cuban filmmaking following the revolution. Julio García Espinosa's highly influential 1970s essay *Por un cine imperfecto (For an Imperfect Cinema)* warns against striving for technical perfection in the cinema of a still emerging political movement. "Imperfect cinema" by contrast should embrace its incompleteness not only because of maker's limited resources but also because attempting to "match the production values of the big commercial movie is a waste of resources."[95]

Aside from material implications, imperfect cinema also was characterized by Espinosa as having certain ethical implications. As Michael Channan describes the ethos of imperfect cinema worked against the "…commercial cinema of the metropolis" whose values were "irredeemably superficial, the beautifully controlled surface becomes a way of lulling the audience into passive consumption."[96] Imperfect cinema, by contrast, subverted expectations for an aesthetically perfect cinematic production breaking with traditional cinematic values in the process.

The "Imperfect cinema" movement is an important precursor to what Ann Marie Stork references as "street filmmaking" during the Special Period. Stork notes that during the Special Period street filmmakers were using cinema during a moment of rapid transition to reimagine their place in the world. Specifically, an increasingly globalized world as filmmakers "adapt(ed) to their nation's abrupt entrance into the current world system."[97]

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[95] Michael Chanan. *Cuban Cinema*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 305.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Stock, Ann Marie. *On Location in Cuba Street Filmmaking During Times of Transition*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 26.

Stork uses the language of the street not only as a reference to a literal site but also a liminal space that "straddle(s) state structures, public spheres, and the global marketplace…"[98] Additionally, the street references a creative process with its base on spontaneity and improvisation due in part to filmmakers having to work with low or non-existent budgets. Street filmmaking in the 1990s worked outside of the state film industry, unlike the Imperfect cinema movement which was amply supported by the government. Without previous structures of government approval or support, Stork notes that street filmmaking in the 1990s allowed Cuban film and the representations of Cuban identity, once crafted by a revolutionary collective, to become more of a "coproduction."[99]

Although Stork does not discuss Alom's film in her work, I believe *Habana Solo* is a prime example of street filmmaking not only literally because of its content but also because of its practice. Like Stork Alom uses the street and the theme of the city and urbanity more broadly to address the complexity of Cuba's increasing globalization. Speaking to both themes of the changing city itself due to tourism and the changing filmic representation of Cuba in the global imaginary. The street acts as a way for Alom to create a sense of Cuban identity that is not rooted in the nation necessarily but in urban life, specifically black urban life and music.

Rhythm as a new storytelling model

The flow of *Habana Solo* is defined by a musical solo which is then interrupted by another musical solo which serves as a new point of departure for a new montage. The film and shows different visuals depending on the mood defined by each instrument, the cello sequence looks distinctly different from the electric guitar solo sequence. The flow or structure of the film

[98] Ibid, 57.
[99] Ibid, 28.

is defined by the rhythm of a distinct sequence which is then interrupted by the film's next sequence.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo in his seminal text *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern perspective* discusses the notion of a 'polyrhythm' a "rhythm cut through by other rhythms, which are still cut through by other rhythms…"[100] This rhythm cut through by another rhythm, Benítez-Rojo notes, causes a sense of displacement as the previously rhythm is no longer central. This, in turn, makes it so a polyrhythm creates a state of flux.

Benítez-Rojo's inquiry into rhythm was a way of finding new models for conveying the complex history of the Caribbean. Previously, writers and scholars had avoided writing about the Caribbean because it was punctuated by "fragmentation, instability, isolation, uprootedness, heterogeneity, syncretism, contingency, and impermanence."[101] Benítez-Rojo, conversely, turned to these very characteristics as a mechanism to convey the intricacies of Caribbean life.[102] Rhythm is one of the elements that Benítez-Rojo highlights as being capable of speaking to the multi-layered and non-linear history of the Caribbean.

Habana Solo's continual shifting of musical styles and its various montages, relatedly, creates an experience of continual dislocation as the viewer comes to identify the rhythm of the sequence and its relationship to what the film foregrounds visually only to see it shift rapidly. Perhaps nowhere is this shift more rapid than in the sequence following the guitar solo and Alom's focus on still shots of pedestrians. In a rapid cut the film transitions to an electric guitar

[100] Antonio Benitez Rojo. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 17.
[101] Dunja Fehimović, *National Identity in 21st- Century Cuban Cinema Screening the Repeating Island.* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.
[102] Ibid.

solo and footage of ants eating the carcass of a dead creature. (fig.3.17) The sequence, almost nightmar-ish, marks a drastic change from the lighthearted mood set up by the previous montage.

Bentiez- Rojo's account of a "rhythm cut through by other rhythms, which are still cut through by other rhythms…" seems to be an apt descriptor of the way in which Alom's film moves from one musical sequence to another. Alom introduces a new musician in each montage, shows the city in a way that echoes the rhythm of the music, and then shifts to a totally different musical style requiring the viewer to continually reorient themselves. This play with viewer expectation and rapid disruption, setting up a pattern and then replacing it with its opposite makes it so there are multiple emotional registers we experience in Alom's account of Havana. The implication is that although the film plays with the expectation of Havana being depicted through one "solo" there is not one musical style or sound that encompass the experience of the city. Similar to Benitez- Rojo's account of rhythm as a new narrative mechanism. In *Habana Solo* multiple rhythms serve as a way to tell a story of city life that, echoing the descriptors used by the Cuban novelist, intentionally foreground fragmentation, instability, uprootedness, and contingency.

Conclusion- Pleasure, the Body, and the Motions of Emotions

Habana Solo importantly emphasizes a sense of pleasure, play, and enjoyment. This can be seen specifically in its last couple of sequences. The penultimate scene of *Habana Solo* is a blissful depiction of young people diving into the Malecon and swimming. In the background of this sequence a woman sings acapella and a man plays the electric base. Both add to a feeling of levity and abandon as we see the young people dive into the ocean and throw themselves off Havana's iconic sea wall. This montage focuses on close up shot of young men diving into water, (fig.3.18) floating in the ocean, or having waves crash down on them. Their enjoyment,

echoed by the angelic music is almost palatable as we see the young men, arms outstretched, floating in the ocean. (fig.3.19)

This sense of absorption and enjoyment continues in the film's final sequence. *Habana* Solo's conclusion denies the music that has been so central to how the viewer locates themselves throughout the film. A man is dancing on a rooftop, the landscape of the city paralleling the one we are shown at the beginning of the film in the background. (figure.3.20) The camera lingers on his face, (fig.3.21) his feet, (fig.3.22) and his torso (fig.3.23) as he steadily keeps dancing to the rhythm of a beat we cannot hear. As the man dances on the Havana rooftop we see fragments of his body in motion, his arms active at his side. His feet keeping the steady pace of someone who has practiced the movement extensively. While we start with fragments of the city's ruins we end with fragments of this man's body in motion.

Throughout its brief duration *Habana Solo* has set up the expectation that rhythm is the way in which we can locate and orient ourselves with what is happening on the screen and, by extension, the city. This refusal to play music in the final sequence, as a result, comes as a shock. However, in doing so, Alom foregrounds the dancer's absorption in his task. The partial denial signals an emphasis in his experience and prioritizes his pleasure rather than having the viewer locate themselves in the city.

Giuliana Bruno notes in *Atlas of Emotion,* that films of the city create an interplay between depictions of feelings and movement, or as Bruno calls it "motion and emotion."[103] Aside from the architecture showcased in the film's introductory sequence, *Habana Solo* mostly focuses on bodies, ephemera, and quotidian urban happenings, foregrounding these elements as equally important parts of the urban landscape. Likewise, *Habana Solo* foregrounds the

[103] Ibid.

importance of movement and emotion, specifically those of black people. It places their feelings, their music, dance, and personal enjoyment at the center of its depiction of the city opposing the urban policy of the moment and legacy of depictions of Afro-Cubans in urban space.

Figure 3.1
Habana Solo Opening, Panorama of the city
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo,* 2000. Still frame.

Figure 3.2
Close up of Piano Player in Opening Sequence
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo,* 2000. Still frame.

Figure 3.3
Havana's ruins
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo,* 2000. Still frame.

Figure 3.4
Street view drum solo sequence
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Figure 3.5
Close up of drummer as he plays
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Figure 3.6
Interior of elevator shaft
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Figure 3.7
Musician playing guiro inside elevator
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Figure 3.8
Young woman standing in front of bicycle taxi in Havana's streets
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig. 3.9
Construction workers look back at the camera
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.10
Young woman plays with her pose
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.11
Same young woman throws up her hands breaking her previous pose
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

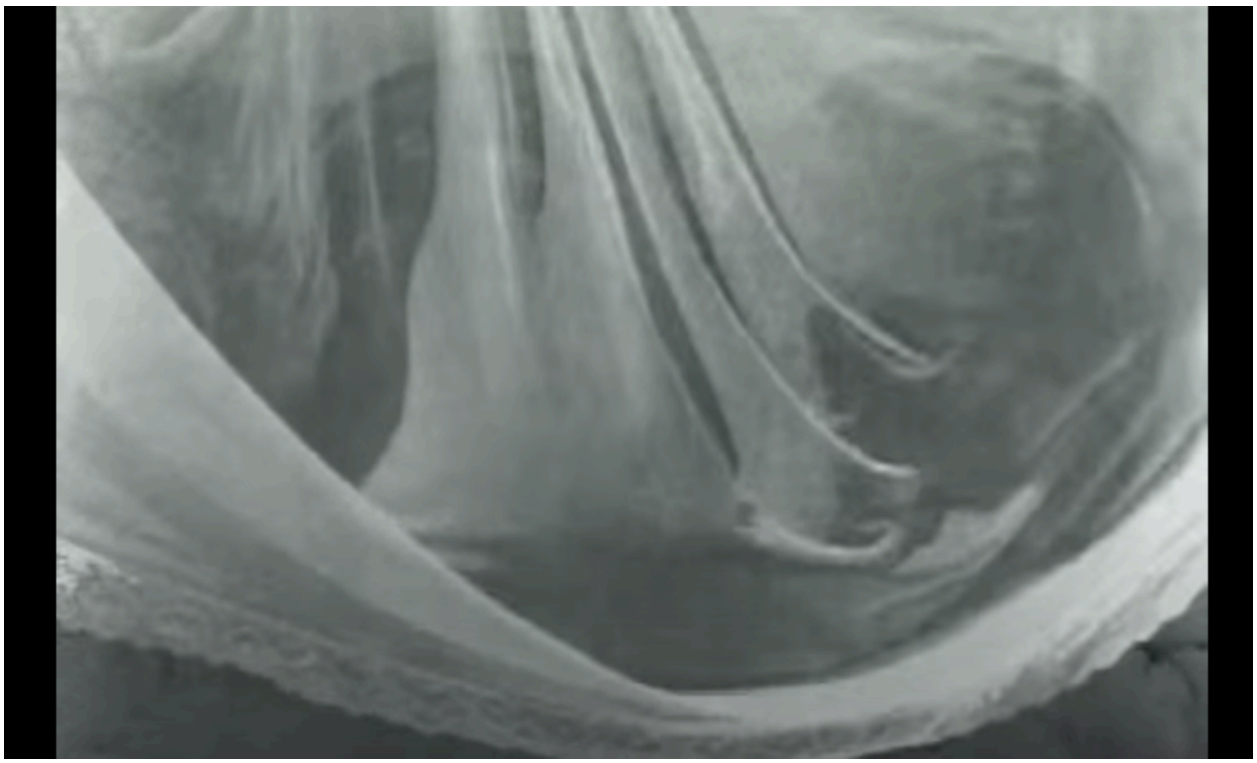

Fig 3.12
A sheer fabric softly billows
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

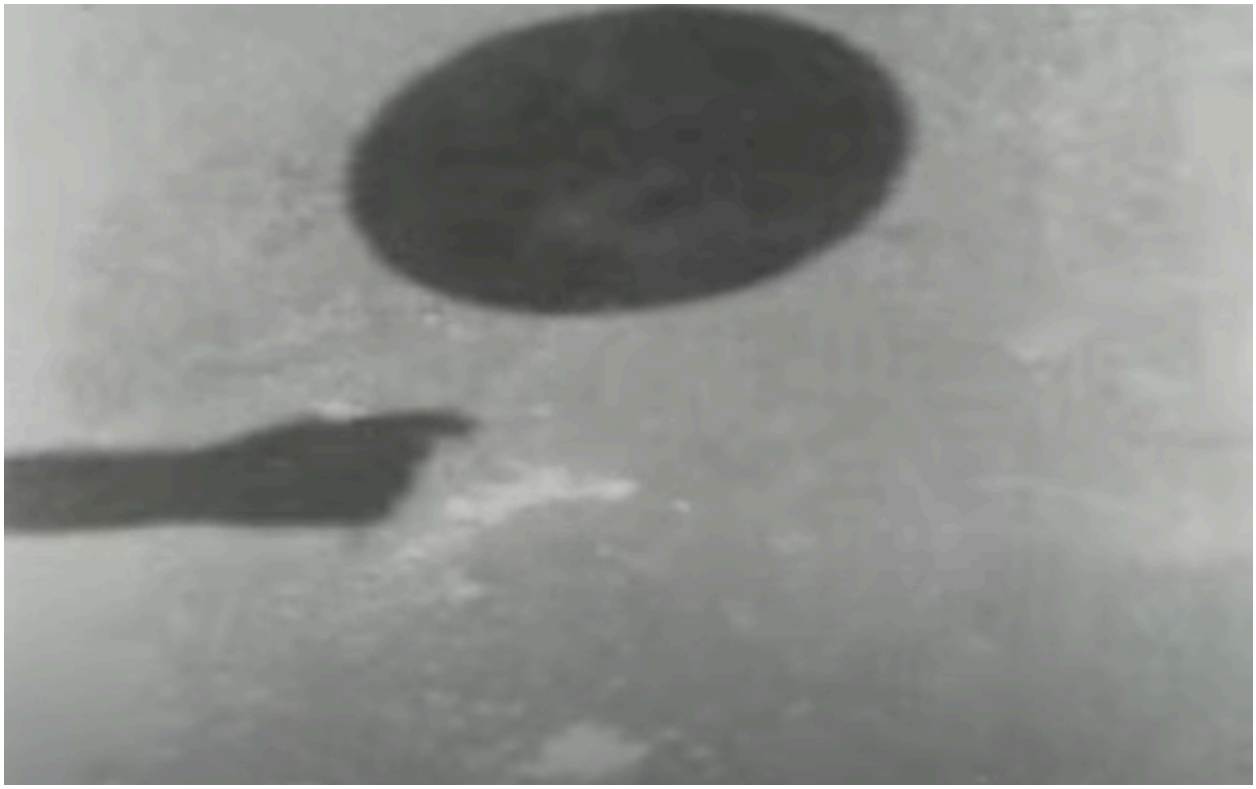

Fig 3.13
Shadow of a young child playing with a balloon in the street
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.14
Decorative garlands hang between balconies
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig.3.15
Metal spikes in a construction site move slightly
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

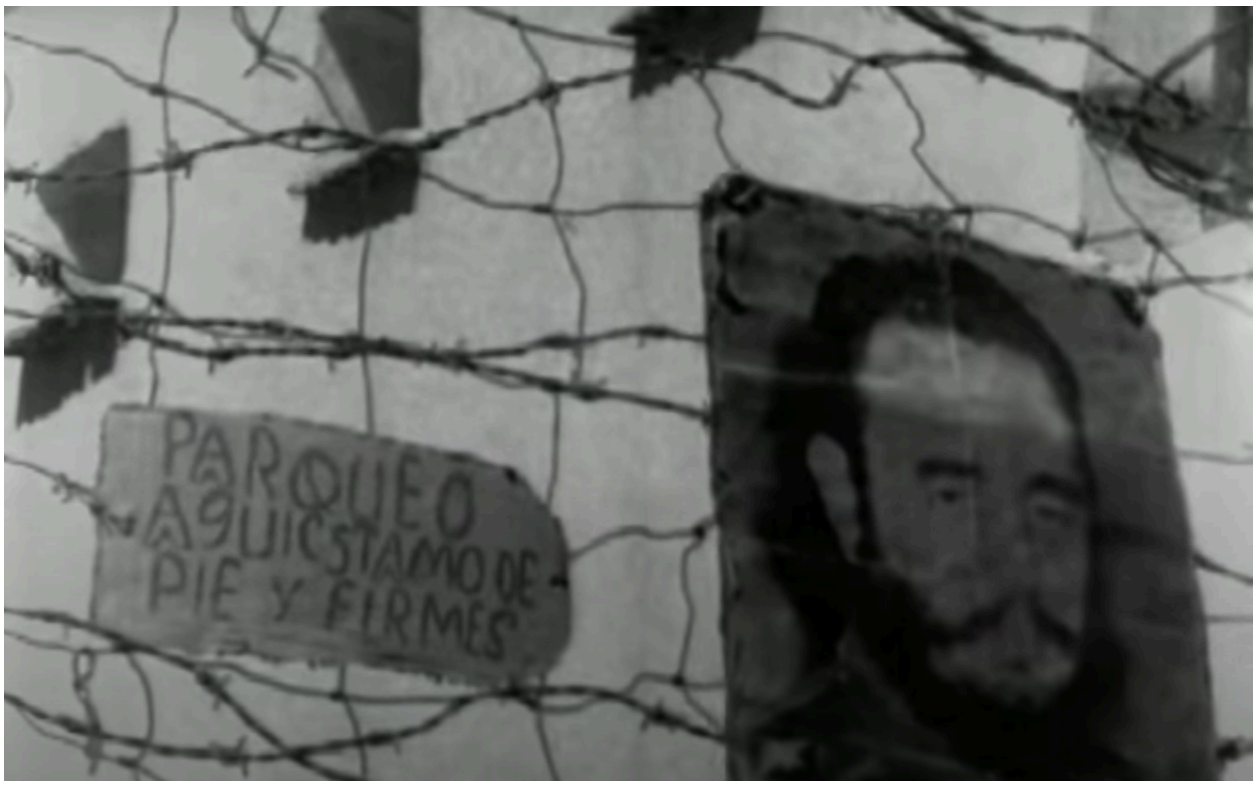

Fig 3.16

Metal fence with picture of Fidel beside a cardboard sign that reads “Parque o Aguicstamo de Pie y Firmes”

Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.17
Ants devour an animal carcass
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.18
Young boy jumps off the Malecon into the ocean
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.19
A young boy arms outstretched floats in the ocean
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.20
A man with sunglasses dances with the panorama of Havana in the background
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.21
Close up shot of the dancer's head
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

Fig 3.22
Close up shot of the dancer's feet
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

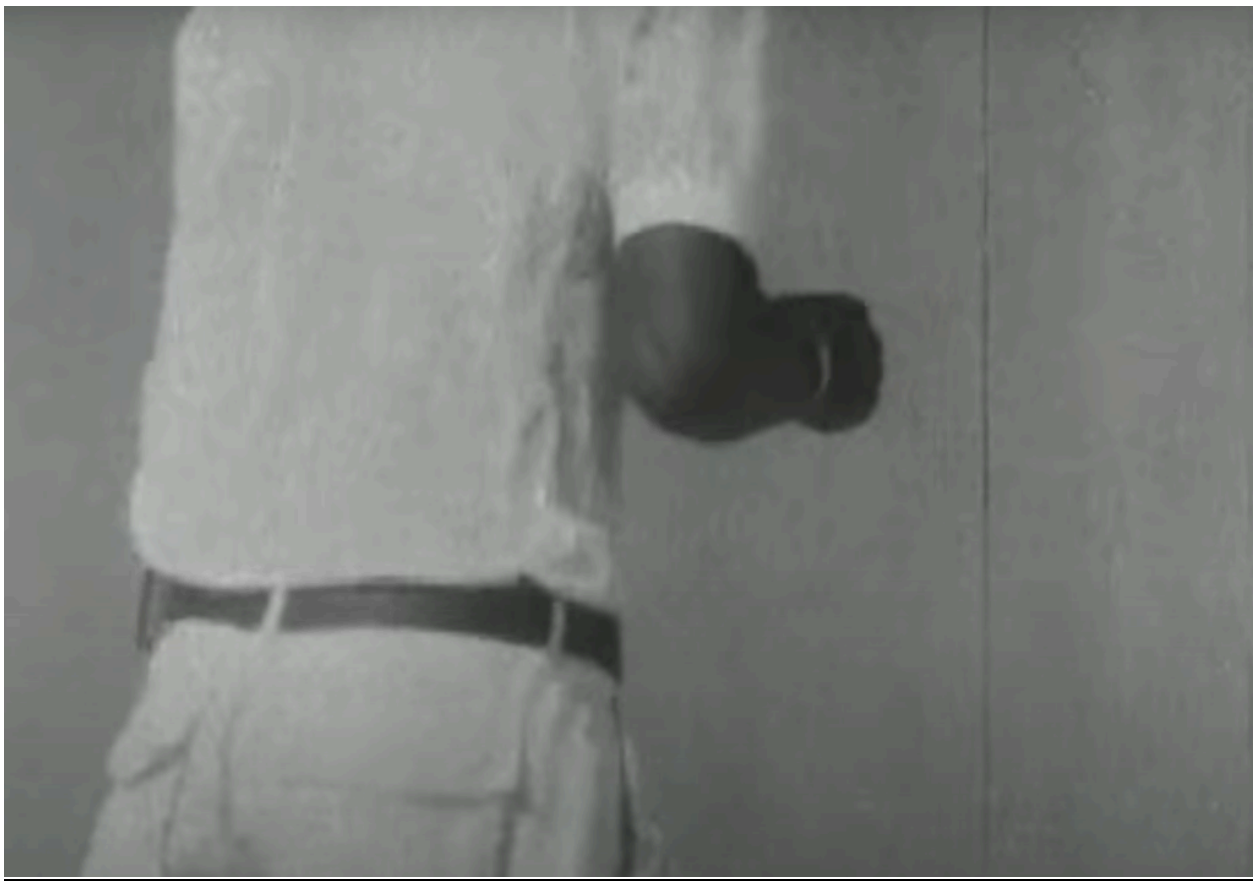

Fig 3.23
Close up shot of the dancer's torso
Juan Carlos Alom, *Habana Solo*, 2000. Still frame.

By way of Conclusion

On the 17th of April, 2021 the 27N, a collective of artists and cultural workers in Cuba, released a manifesto that outlined their demands. The collective was formed following the events of the night of November 27, 2020 where more than three hundred intellectuals, artists, and journalists gathered outside the Ministry of Culture to demand recognition of their rights. The gathering was also a bold rejection of state violence which, had been carried out for years, but had seen a swell in recent months after the government had forcibly displaced those participating in a hunger strike in Cuba's San Isidro neighborhood. The artists protesting, expressed their solidarity with the San Isidro movement as they protested to free one of their incarcerated group members. The 27N according to the manifesto "arose out of the need to advocate for demands that were expressed that day, and our desire to participate in the present and future of Cuba."

The manifesto begins by noting "We thus assert our right to express ourselves, to associate and demonstrate freely, and we condemn before Cuba and the world any act that violates these fundamental human rights. We demand that the Cuban government assume its administrative duty to listen to its citizens, to promote peace and respect for our rights." Demanding a more participatory citizenry, the manifesto is also a reaction to laws like the Decreto 349 which prohibited artists, including collectives, musicians, and performers from operating in public or private spaces without prior approval by the Ministry of Culture. As Amnesty International outlined, Individuals or businesses that hired artists without authorization could also be sanctioned. The 27N in response to these measures expressed certain demands including: Political Freedom (the right to freedom of expression and public assembly), Economic Freedom (the right of every citizen to engage in different forms of ownership and management), Legislation and Independent Media, and The Right to Assembly and Collective Organization.

I note these events not just because I believe they provide important context but also to show that although Juan Carlos Alom's work created during the 1990s and 2000s may feel like very recent history it provides a very important context for the political situation unfolding presently. Decreto 349 would have made the type of work Alom and his contemporary photographers and filmmakers during the Special Period impossible. As a result, we would not have, what I argue, are some important and deeply personal interventions in Cuban contemporary art. Throughout this thesis I have tried to trace Alom's contributions by contextualizing them in the cultural creation made after the revolution in Cuba and about Cuba. It strikes me that now as we are in the midst of a global health crisis questions of how we narrate a moment of upheaval are particularly politically pertinent. Personally, I also see Alom's work as a personal reflection of how to represent experiences during a moment of transition. For this considerate and deeply felt inquiry, I am grateful and look forward humbly to see what research further develops on the subject.

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